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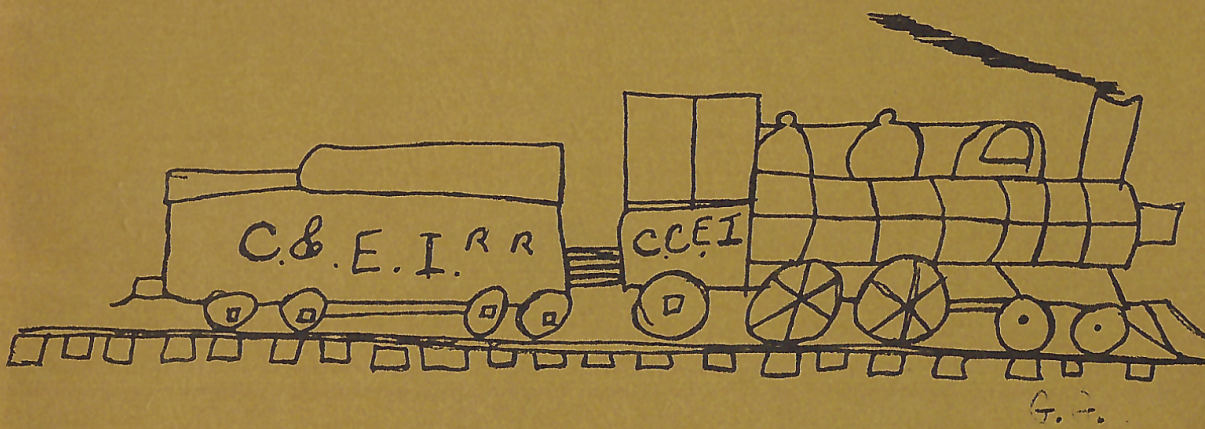
Talking Poems

BY

Philo Road Poets

Senior Poets of Champaign County I
Fall 1977



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by Philo Road Poets
at the Urbana Nursing Home

Edited by
Roberta Scouffas

Senior Poets of Champaign County I
Fall 1977

Champaign County Arts and Humanities Council
17 East University Avenue
Champaign, Illinois 61820

Credits and Acknowledgements

Sine qua non

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*

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Ron Szoke

February 1978

THE PHILO ROAD POETS

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NOTES ON THE POETS

FRANCES BURGESS. Born Sept.26, 1894. Reads widely, likes literature and drama. Grew up in Urbana, and finished one year at U. of I. Lived in Tucson, Arizona. Her husband president of U. of A. there.

BARBARA CLARK. Born in northern Vermont in 1889. Trip to Europe. Degree in Nursing. Lived 50 of her years in Boston and New York City. Has written 2 books in her field and is working on a third instead of talking poems with us.

ALTA CRUSE. Born in 1891 in rural Kentucky.

(continued)

NOTES ON THE POETS (cont'd)

No school to attend so she never learned to write. Likes to sew. Raised a family and saw to it her children got an education. Alta has left Urbana Nursing Home.

CHARLIE DELPHEY. Born Jan. 18, 1898. Lived in St. Louis. Worked on a farm. Joined the Army (W.W.I). Likes sports and talk-poems.

CARLOS DIAZ. Born Mexico, Feb. 27, 1908, but lived in this country. He has been sick and unable to participate in more poems.

FLORENCE FOOTE. Born Sept. 12,1914. Alta Cruse's daughter. She too has left the Home.

ETHEL GRAYBEAL. Born in 1894. Raised a family. Played piano and pipe organ for two churches. Loves poetry.

GARNETT GIBSON. Born Aug.9, 1900. (1899?) in Fairland, Il. lived in a 3-room house. Went through the public schools, and summer school at Charleston. Then taught grade school there and in Champaign County. Tried many jobs: railroad shops, postmaster, free-lance journalist, printed in many papers.

NELLIE GIBSON. Born 1907. Garnett and Nellie have been married forty years.

DAISY JOHNSON. A visitor from Office on Aging but did a talking poem with us at UNH.

HELEN LONGTIN. Born July 16, 1913 in Joliet, Il., and grew up there.

HELEN McCULLOUGH. Wrote some fine poems early in her life. I am glad we got to share them.

BLANCHE McDOWELL. Born 1901. WONDER FELL poem.

ERNEST NEWMAN. Born 1892 in Clark County, Il.

THERESA PELICHOFF. Born 1904 in Hungary. Came to U.S. in 1908. Stopped school after eighth grade to work in a factory to support Mother. Married, lived on farm in Il.

JOHN SAUGET. Born 1944. UNH Administrator.

ELSIE SCHEIB. Born 1897. Taught school.

ELTA SOLOMAN. Born 1893. Lived on a farm.

CLARA VEACH. Born 1884. Farm childhood. Raised a family. Recites poetry; plays piano.

ROSELLA WILSON. Born 1902. Lived on a farm.

REMEMBERINGS IN AUTUMN--a composite
by nine Seniors, Sept. 15.

I remember yellow marigolds in autumn
and I remember cutting grass
and then raking it.

H.L.

I remember my boyhood days
when my only companion was a small
bob-tailed dog by the name of Ted

G.G.

Mother brought us children to America,
and I remember her saying in Hungarian
"Children, don't go along the rail!
You'll slip under and fall in the sea
and who could save you? I can't swim!"

T.P.

I remember fall when the leaves fell,
I would go to the woods and play in them.
And I remember my first day of school.

F.F.

I remember when I was in the Army
and we went to Texas from Company B.
I cooked coffee. . .and coming back
on the railroad, they took our guns away
It was a Democratic president: Wilson.

C.D.

I remember a poem that started
"Come little leaves said the wind one day."
When I was riding through the valley,
I felt wonderful--falling leaves everywhere
and winter approaching. . .

C.V.

continued

I wonder. . .do the heavens open
to let the clouds unite?
Or does the wind blow
to let them come together?
First there is the weaving of
the billows of rippled air,
then the piling of one over the other.

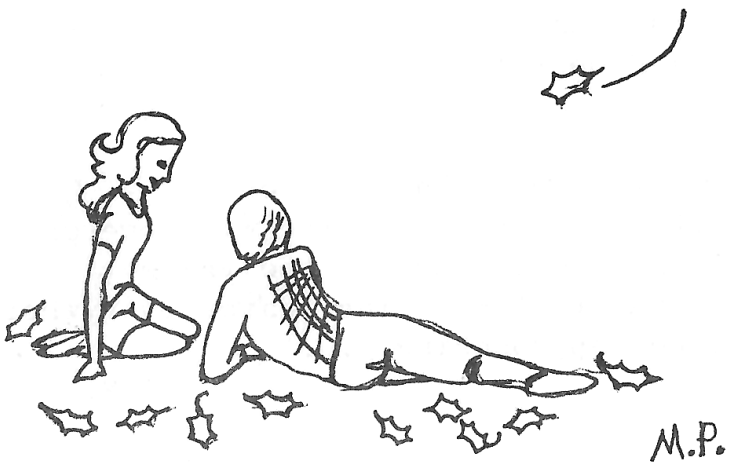
B.C.

I remember when I was a little girl
and Mother left me and the girls home.
I was standing by the window, waiting
for her to come home and I SAW AN ANGEL!
I don't remember nothing else.

A.C.

I remember in the autumn, raking leaves
and catching lightning bugs
and putting them in bottles.

F.B.



TWO FRAGRANT TEA ROSES--a composite
by five Seniors, Sept. 22.

The rose smells sweet and is so pretty
only God could make it.
When I was about ten years old,
a pink rambling rose came into bloom
on our front porch.

H.L.

The Shell Market in St. Louis has roses.
I worked in the Veterans' Greenhouse.
They hauled in concrete by wheel-barrow.

C.D.

You can smell the difference
in the fragrance of the two roses.
The light red has a different smell
from the dark red.
I think the bright red is the prettiest
because I just like that color.

A.C.

I have roses almost
all around my house.
My husband loves flowers--
and the rose is his favorite.
I never come to town
but what I bring
somebody roses!
I just keep them in the
window in the living room.

B.McD.

The rose is my favorite flower
whatever the color may be.
Some look like velvet
and the fragrance is everlasting.

F.B.

PICTURES OF THE PAST--a composite
by three Seniors, Sept. 22.

This picture reminds me of
the bridges when we crossed the river
between Kentucky and Illinois
when I was a child.

F.F.

This card is singing. . .reminds me of
going down the lane humming,
nobody in my home but me.
Sometimes I do my work with humming
and singing a song.
When I was working I had to sing--
nobody there to hear it but me.

E.Sc.

Nothing like a memory of my childhood
I sit under the old appletree,
days of summer, a balmy breeze blowing
brings down on my head summer's treat.

G.G.

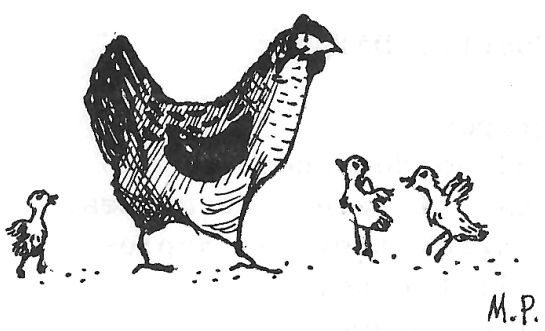
THE PAST by Theresa Pelichoff

I was thinking about songs
we used to sing as children

I was thinking about the
fields of wheat
and the goslings
with their mother-hen

I was thinking about the
old mother-hen scratching
for all she was worth
for her little babies
Didn't do my mother's garden
any good. . .
That was my job, to make sure
the hen got out of there.

But oh, what would we have done
without those goose-feathers?
--Coverlets and mattresses
to warm us in our poverty.



POTATOES by Theresa Pelichoff

Once
we found a few
potatoes.
In the stream we washed
them off.
Mother cooked them
on her little cookstove.
We were in seventh heaven!

Mother had already eaten she said
But I looked back. . .
Why then was she eating
every tiny crumb
as she cleared the dishes away?

APPLES FOR JELLY by Helen Longtin

I like apples red, green, and yellow
They taste so good.
We picked up the green apples for jelly.
It smelled good, cooking,
and tasted delicious.
We had it just once a year.
In the fall.
And we really looked forward to it.

APPLES by Charlie Delphey

Apples and grapes
Red apples and golden ones
and red grapes. I sure like grapes.
At Eastside Market they had apples
when I was a little boy
and they tasted so good
that I wanted to jump up and down.

A FIGHTER by Garnett Gibson

My Bantam rooster, Dolpha,
with spurs so long
and green feathers so bright,
was King of the Roost.

Even as a small chick
he was a fighter.
He'd pull the Old Rooster's
tail feathers: scared him to death.

John Lewis said "I'll give you
a quarter for that
famous fightin' rooster!"
So I sold him.

Later he got killed in a fight
--a sad affair for sure.
Gave his life for
Fame and Greatness.

The Oldtime Steam Locomotive--any memory of it--was the Oct. 13 subject.

WONDER FELL by Blanche McDowell

I have heard the steam locomotive
whistle lots of times.
Its sound was wonderfell
--wish I could hear it again!

ALL ABOARD! by Charlie Delphey

The Louisville-Nashville Train
used to run down Poplar Street
from the Union Station in St. Louis.

The engine had four small wheels,
I think, and six big ones with pistons.
From St. Louie to New Orleans,
that big bell kept ringing
and that steam puffing,
with at least twenty Pullman coaches
coming along behind!

IN THE NIGHT by Elta Soloman

How they would blow,
those old-time whistles!
We lived close to a railroad track.
In the night the hooting woke us and we
peeked under the windowshade and saw
the dark train, five or six cars long,
go clacking by, its faint whistle
blown at the next crossroad.

HAUNTING SOUNDS by Garnett Gibson

It was CHUG, CHUG, CHUG of the engine
as the train moved slowly
from the station.

Then a CHUFF CHUFF CHUFF
and a clicking of the rails
as the train disappeared
in the distance.

Those sounds bring back to me
my brown curly dog Ted
that always chased trains.
He would run back and forth
in front of the engine
as the wheels gathered speed. . .
Finally he got cut in two--and I
didn't know what to do
without my constant companion. . .

FREIGHT TRAIN by Theresa Pelichoff

When I was four
in the country-side of Austro-Hungary
we used to run out of the house--
whatever we were doing--
to see the monster train go by!

And the night-time long freight-train
through our sleep sounded as if
the very ground, shaken and trembling,
was turned upside down.

ADOBE CLAY by Theresa Pelichoff

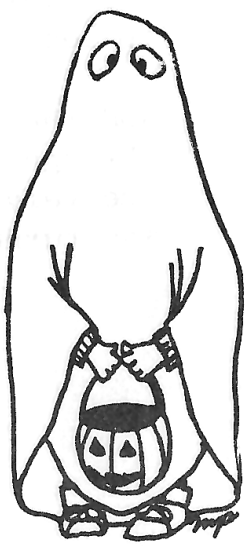
Once my father was building onto
our adobe farmhouse in Hungary.
He said we children could help!
Chunks of clay had been watered down
the night before in the big frame box.
Our job was to tromp and stomp
the clay with our bare feet
so the adobe bricks would be strong
when dried in the sun and last
a long time.

What fun it was--squish and ca-rush!
But Oh, if you slipped and fell,
you would have to let the mud dry on you

When we tromped sauerkraut in its barrel
we had to first scrub and scrub our feet
But this was fun--no scrubbing till after!

HALLOWEEN NIGHT by Carlos Diaz (his first)

Children going from house to house
asking for goodies
candies and apples.
They are dressed differently
from schooldays!
Like ghosts
or clowns. . .

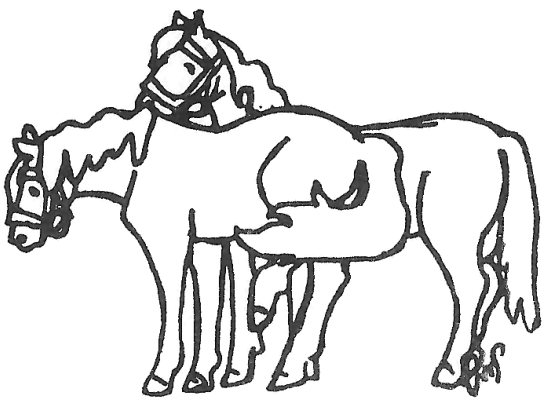


Poetry Workshop subject for Oct. 20th: choice of HORSES, COOKING, or a SPECIAL PERSON.

WORKHORSES by Ernest Newman (his first)

On the farm
we'd get up early
--around four o'clock--
to have everything ready for business.
We used to work horses in those days.
Up early, and horse up them horses,
and work till the scheduled time.
Those wonderful horses!
We had four. And we used to have one
that was hard to ride. It'd throw a person
off in no time at all!
If you rode him to round up the cows
at milkin' time, you'd better watch out.

Whatever the day's work
--plowing, mowing hay, hauling corn--
whatever it was, men and horses did it.
And afterwards, we'd hitch up,
drive into town,
and have a nice time.
But at four, next morning,
ready for work again.



BY HORSE AND WAGON by Charlie Delphey

When I was in the eighth grade
I worked on a farm in Maplewood, Mo.
Made $18.50 a week.
On Saturday mornings, I'd fill the wagon
with sacks of apples I'd picked.
Gunny sacks of potatoes and onions too.
Then I'd brush the big brown horse
till his coat gleamed.
Hitched him to the vegetable wagon
and we were off toward Third Street
and the Pallazoo Market to sell our wares
and return to the farm
with flour and sugar.

BASEBALL by Charlie Delphey

Before I went into the army,
I used to go to ballgames.
Cost a dollar to get in:
The Boston Braves and St. Louis Cards,
but the Cardinals lost, 2 to 1!
Brent, a first baseman, hit a home run.
They caught it and lost it.
I bought peanuts and hotdogs and
yes, I was happy.

A MATCHED TEAM by Garnett Gibson

Midge and Topsey were Texas ponies,
a light bay color,
with jet black manes and tails
flying in the wind.
They were king-pins of
the Bill Williams barnyard!
Hitched to a light buggy,
with old Bill sittin' back,
the reins draped over the whipstand,
Midge and Topsey would go
at a fast gallop, or a trot,
or a pace for most of a day,
the cloud of dust swirling behind them
on the straight country roads.
Back to the farm, early afternoon,
and Bill, their proud owner,
would unharness them and tend to
their needs. They were ready now
to bed down on the dry yellow straw
in their special box-stall.
Saturday was a day of ease and
green pastures for the sturdy pair:
cool sweet grass to crop, a chance to
run free and to drowse in the shade
of tall trees.
Midge and Topsey. What a pair!

GOBBLER by Clara Veach

Out on the farm of my child-hood,
the big turkey gobbler
would corner any of us little tikes
whenever he could.
Oh he was mean, his beak fierce.

He'd spread his fine fan-tail,
hunch his wings,
his red comb and wattles flashing.
He hated red--even a bandana
would set him off. He was ready
to gobble all of us up for his feast!
Good thing Dad had a hoe in his hand.

Somehow us children never grieved
when Gobbler came to the table
on a Thanksgiving platter.

COOK by Charlie Delphey

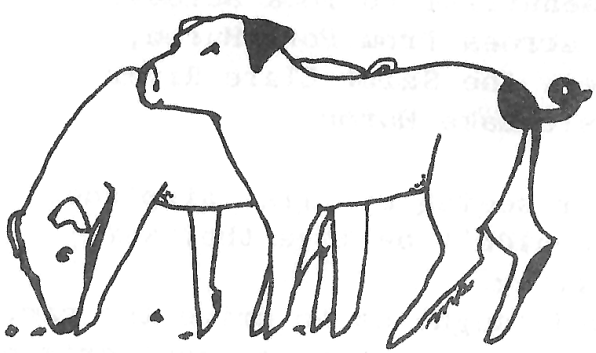
I was an army Cook at Camp MacArthur.
I made coffee, peeled potatoes,
cut up cabbage and celery.
Then I went to a camp in Kansas City.
I never went to sea though. . .
Wish I could have gone overseas
I'd like to cross that old Atlantic!

CHRISTMAS DAY by Charlie Delphey

Got ourselves a Christmas tree in St. Louis.
Hauled it home in a truck
and set it up in the front room.
First the candles clamp on the limb-tips,
Then the popcorn and cranberry strings.
And we are ready for Santa and Christmas.

BILL WILLIAMS by Garnet Gibson

People could hear Bill Williams
all over town
"H-ey! He-ey! He-ey!" shoutin' at
the terrified hogs, loadin' em into
a stock car on the long freight train
headed for the UNION STOCKYARDS in
Chicago, Ill. . .Bill Williams couldn't
think about it, mebbe.
Mebbe saw the place once.
That why he shouted so loud?
To get above the hogs' terror?
"HE-EY! HE-EY! HE-EY!"
and a pronged stick for a prod.
The same Bill Williams
that curry-combed the ponies and
built that warm box-stall for them?



CHORES by Elsie Scheib

When we got home from school
we had to pitch in helping my mother.
I ran the sweeper, helped peel potatoes
or set the table. . .We didn't mind work
because it lightened Mother's burden a bit.
We all talked together. Sometimes we sang
as we worked in the kitchen.

IN CANADA by Elsie Scheib

Our home was maybe half a block
from Lake Huron. We could just run
across the sand and into the lake!
I remember the first time Mother took us
down to the lake, and told us
what we could, and could not, do.
When my mother said yes or no, well
she really made us mind.

Every once in a while, I go back
to Lake Huron to see Mother and Dad. . .
It's so beautiful to look across.
We lived across from Port Huron,
right where the Saint Clare River
flowed into Lake Huron.

I remember seeing my first airplane:
We just couldn't believe they were
really flying!
Later, Dad taught us to drive the car.
Boy oh boy, was he strict about driving!
Most of the time he was so kind and gentle.

(Leaving the room, Elsie turned back to say)
"I've just gone back to the lake, you see!"

IN MY OWN HOUSE by Elta Soloman

I remember when I was a child
I wanted to work in the garden
with my father. I did my part
helping in the house too. But
the joy of the garden work I loved.

Later, in my own house
I would start the day making breakfast
for my husband and son.
Pancakes and coffee and sometimes bacon.
I would then clean the house.

Dinner was the big meal of the day.
We had meat and potatoes.
I boiled, then mashed the potatoes
and added seasoning.
After dinner we would go
into the sitting room and talk.
The sitting room had a wood-burning stove
and we would all sit cozily
around the stove, talking about the day.

CHRISTMAS--ONCE A YEAR by Carlos Diaz

The snow falls on the ground.
People put Christmas trees in their houses
and decorate them with lights.
Then they give each other
shirts or house slippers
or neckties.

C.S. LEWIS, AUTHOR by Frances Burgess

(A Special Person Poem)

From Atheist to Christian
What a pilgrimage that must be. . .
Yet C.S. Lewis did it.
From Doubt to Doctor of Divinity.

MY SISTERS AND I by Theresa Pelichoff

When we came over from Austria-Hungary
my sisters and I wore our hair
in long pony-tails down our backs.
It was hard because people teased
and taunted us.
American children resented us--
Did they think we would
take their toys from them
or something?
Was that the reason they pulled our hair
until I thought my neck would snap?

Naturally the neighbors were curious.
But the children were mean.
They yelled "Hunky-Polak!" Polak?
I didn't know what I was. . .

Once a teacher looked out the window,
came out with a ruler,
and scolded the taunters.
It consoled us but it
didn't help us make friends.

Oh, this is a wonderful country.
Don't you ever forget that.
In the Old Country we didn't always have
enough flour to bake our bread.

LOAVES by Theresa Pelichoff

When I think
of my mother's big loaves of bread--
the sweet yeasty smell as she kneaded
the dough in the big carved-out
wooden bowl
--the way she would punch it
with both hands again and again
with all her precious strength. . .

I said "Don't pound it so hard, Mama!
It didn't hurt anybody. . ."
Mama laughed--why?
"and if Bread is Body of Christ, Mama,
maybe God will be mad at us."

Mama's eyes were smiling. She helped me
climb up and sit on the table-edge
where I could watch carefully.
"The best bread," she said, as if it was
our secret, "is made from dough
that's been pressed hard, like this. . .
then folded over and pressed hard
many times. But for you and me, it is
always done with reverence.
and gratitude to God."

A PERSON I VALUE by Frances Burgess

Abraham Lincoln.
One of our greatest presidents.
A poor, self-educated man
who rose from a back-woods country lawyer
to the presidency of the United States
. . .Abraham Lincoln was a lonely man
yet when he spoke, people listened.

THE BAKE OVEN by Theresa Pelichoff

You know we had those ovens
made of stone and built into the wall.
We had to crawl inside
to wash them clean for the bread.
Mother would tell us children
to collect wood for the fire
--even the small twigs blown off
during a windstorm.
All of us walked together
gathering all we could find.
Even the dogs, coming from all directions,
would join the game.
Then there would be a dog-fight.
How I dreaded that!
Because I might be caught
in the middle of it. . .
But I knew that soon our house
would be warm with this wood
and the good smell of bread baking.

MY SON RALPH AT SCHOOL by Theresa Pelichoff

The Teacher asked the children
to tell about their pets.
Ralph said "Our cat
just had five kittens!
But the dog couldn't have any.
Just pups."

Next day, Teacher asked them
to show as well as tell about
something they brought.
Ralph said "Can't show you.
I done ate it. But it was an apple."

THE CATHOLIC NUNS by Theresa Pelichoff

One of my favorite people was a nun.
She was so good to me and my family
--gave us a chance to adjust
to the changes in this country.
The nuns weren't young anymore
but their faces were smooth.
They each had a rosary in a side-pocket
that tinkled as they walked!
As religious as those nuns were,
they'd help the mothers bear their
children. After the baby was born,
"my" nun would sit on a straight chair
and rock the baby to and fro with her body.
To them it was a miracle to love
and comfort a newborn baby. I remember
the loneliness in my mother's eyes--
coming in from the fields, feeling
her labor pains closer together
and no woman to help her then. . .
One elderly nun kept candy in her pocket
for us. She loved us and we loved her.
What would we have done without the nuns?

THANKSGIVING THOUGHTS by Garnett Gibson

When I was a kid
in school, we memorized Thanksgiving poems
and my parents and I always went
to my aunt's house for Thanksgiving Day.
We all had a turkey dinner together.

But Thanksgiving is more than these to me:
A day for love and thankfulness
A day to look to God from whom
all blessings flow.
A day of human happiness
and goodwill to each other.

BISCUITS AND BUTTER by Daisy Johnson

My older brother, Lonnie, loved biscuits
and butter. Mother milked the cow
night and morning.
She sold milk and the butter she churned
to bring in money to support her family.
That butter of hers was good!
Mama was in town delivering the butter
when Lonnie said to baby brother Climmie
"I'm goin' to make some biscuits
and we're goin' to have biscuits and butter.
I'll give you some if you won't tell Mama."
De-licious! But when Mama came in,
Climmie hugged her and told the news
"Mama, Lonnie went into your butter,
ate some, and gave me some,
told me not to tell, and I'm not goin' to!"

MY RED-HEADED BROTHER by Charlie Delphey

When we were young kids
my red-headed brother and I
used to play all day sometimes
in Molding Creek which winds its way
down to the Mississippi River.
We played near the old Cement Plant.
Later we learned to catch crayfish
--wade in barefoot, pants rolled up.
We'd take the crayfish home alive,
cook 'em and eat 'em with salt.
Some days we'd follow the creek
all the way to the river dock.
The Wiggins Ferry takes you across to
East St. Louis--but that was later
when I drove a lumber truck 'n crossed.
But I never forget our peaceful days
--my brother and I and the creek.

Poetry Workshop subjects for Nov. 3:
A Carnival Mood or a Sad Mood or other.

I'M MAD AT PEOPLE TODAY by Clara Veach

I'm HUNGRY and I'm mad.
--You write that down and you tell 'em!
I want a cookie, a cookie, a cookie.

Why can't you have one, Clara-Doll?
"She's on a diet, that's why-it is!"

A Die-it, a diet is right!
Ninety-three years I've lived, and
never once been on a diet before!
A dye-it, a why-it,
Your Clara-Doll don't care-a-tall!
A rhyme-a-dime chime,
a diet, a why-it, a shy little try-it,
Why not?

THE FERRIS WHEEL by Elta Soloman

A bunch of us young people
went to a horse show a long time ago
A Carnival was there
so we said to each other
"Let's take a ride on the Ferris wheel!"
and up we went.
They stopped us on top!
Whew, what you could see from up there!
--but the rocking, the squeeking--
We were dizzy. We were scared.
We yelled down to the man
"Get us down! We want off!"
When we reached the step-way
and the big wheel stopped and steadied,
we drew a deep breath and
off to our next adventure!

A CIRCUS MAKES YOU YOUNG AGAIN
by Ernest Newman

Three years ago I went to see
the Barnum and Bailey Circus!
The elephants were great: they did that
heavy hauling and lifting easy as pie,
getting the big tent and scaffolding up.

In the parade, each elephant was decorated
with spangles, and a beautiful girl
sat on the top of his head directing him!

In the tent performance, the elephants
knelt when told. They gave answers to
arithmetic problems by tapping one foot.
The girls fed them sugarlumps, I think.

I liked the trained horses best.
They helped with the work too, pulling
the big circus wagons, four or six together,
their manes braided with ribbons.

In the tent performance, the girl riders
in short full skirts stood at ease
on the bare backs of their horses,
running smoothly around the track,
no reins needed. Performers and animals
moving with the rhythm of the music.

The trapeze artists, of course,
were constantly flying through the
upper air of the tent
like bright birds swinging
upsidedown, taking our breath away.

And down there on the sawdust floor
of the Big Top, the clowns are
making their jokes, turning their
Sadsack or Slaphappy Faces to us
like Hallowe'en pumpkins
eager to please.

As we leave the tent, we find ourselves
walking down a passage-way between
wild animal cages. Their outcries
take us back to the jungle,
to the pacing, pacing, of captivity.

I almost forgot:
they shot a man out of a cannon too
--straight up in the air!
Scary--but he come floatin' down,
alive and well, swingin'
underneath his parachute.

When my neighbor and I got home
we were mighty tired. But say,
I felt real fine for three days just rememberin'.

MY LONG-AGO SCHOOLHOUSE by Garnett Gibson

The old school bell sounded
loud and clear as it rang out
the courtship of teachers Mae Ewing
and Frank Weger. Mae, her long hair
braided and wound round her head,
wore a long trailing skirt, and those
fashionable leg-o-mutton sleeves,
was the attractive school-marm for sure.
And Frank in his cut-away coat,
white shirt with stiff collar and bowtie!

But back to the schoolhouse
for a typical day!
At first sound of the school-bell,
the kids line up on a narrow walk
that leads to the schoolroom.
At a sharp command from the teacher
the pupils march in and take their seats.
"Readin', writin', arithmetic, and spellin'
Get it, Pupils, good and proper
lest you have to stay in after school,"
says teacher Mae
standing in front of the class with that
old-fashioned chastening-rod!

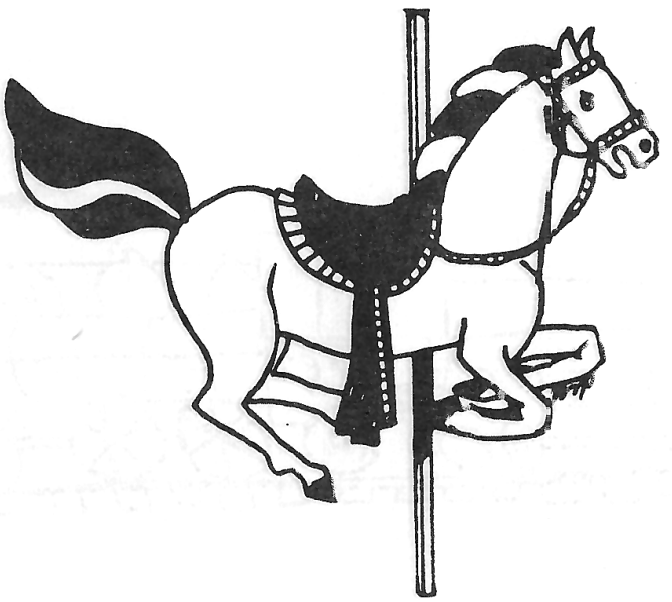
Memories galore. Great things I must say
about the small kids and the big ones
who attended with me that old school
by the side of the road.
It still stands today, forever forlorn.
Seventy years of memories
beam out to those of us
who turned many pages here.

CARNIVAL PARK by Charlie Delphey

In old St. Louis
there was a park with a
Merry-go-round. And, O Boy,
when it was lighted up and swingin' round
with that foggy old calliope
tootin' out those long-gone songs!
It was worth every penny
us kids had to pay.

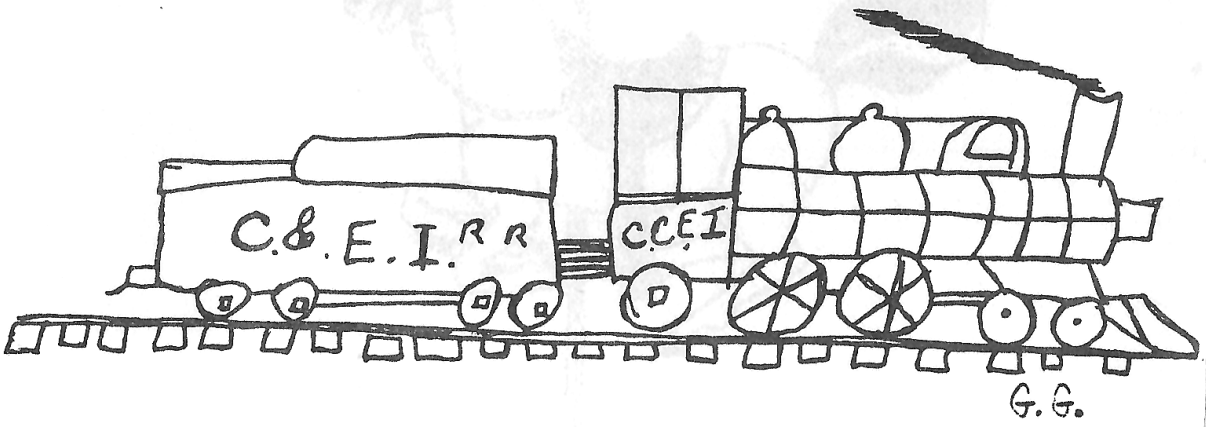
In this same park
they had a cage of live tigers
pacing up and down, silent,
but now and then one of them
would open his mouth full of teeth
and HOWL! That wild sound always
set the kids shrieking, and we
kept on scaring each other.

There was a tight-rope walker too,
his wire strung high, with one end
riveted to the Veterans' Hospital roof.
That guy was really walkin' sky.



RIDIN' THE ROCK ISLAND LINE HOME
by Charlie Delphey

When I went into the Army
I rode the Cotton-belt route.
When I came back from the
Waco Texas Camp,
some Indians from Oklahoma,
who had joined up,
came back to St. Louie with us.
And we all sang together,
ridin' along on "The Rock Island Line"!
--the ol' clickin' clackin'
rat-a-tat-TAT-in
Rock Isl----nd Li----ne!
--the ol' rootin', the tootin'
and the allll1 through a-shoooootin'
Rock Isl-----'nd Li-----ne!



MY FATHER'S DEATH by Clara Veach

I was very young.
I remember Mama's barrel of
sorghum molasses more clearly than
I remember the events of that day.
Don't know why I connect the two but I do.
I remember Mother baking us gingerbread
and sweetening our oatmeal, and giving
sorghum to her neighbor. She sold some,
too, after my father's death.
That big barrel was a consolation to her.

Mama never drove the surrey or the ponies
but the morning Papa's train was due in,
she hitched them up! I remember
her bright pink cheeks as she drove away.
I had to stay with Grandma, who was
nervous, but she did say poems to me.

Then I remember my father in his casket.
The minister lifted me up to see
But why was Papa's face turned away?
The story pieced itself together
when I was older: one cheek, deeply
pitted, had scraped the cinder siding
when he fell. He must have walked back
through the train toward the Smoker.
There were large gaps between cars then--
"open couplings," whatever that meant.
Perhaps he had a dizzy spell and fell.
The train crew simply handed to my mother
the "Death by Falling" telegram.
She got in the surrey, but in shock,
the slack lines giving the ponies free rein.
Finally brought home--my poor Mother!
I never hear a train whistle without
seeing her hand clutching that telegram!

THEY TELL ME I RAN AWAY by Nellie Gibson
(her first!)

"Three years old, barefoot,
in a long dress," they told me.
I don't remember.

Don't stop, Nellie. Tell us more. . .

That's about all. I was down the railroad.
They brought me back.

. . .Little barefoot Nellie
I can see her in my mind's eye!--
Can you see her too?--
starting off to see the wide world.
Down the railroad track. Of course!
where all "those people" on the train go

. . .you must have gotten tired,
the cinders, your bare feet, and
the splinters, stepping from tie to tie

I don't remember. Too young.
But they found me--sitting on the rail!
(with maybe a picked daisy
for a present because) Mama was mad.
Couldn't get her work done for chasin'
after me! So she tied me to the
clothesline when we got back.
To be safe, she said. "You've got room.
Make a mudpie for your doll!"

ON THANKSGIVING DAY by Ernest Newman

We always went to my grandparents' farm
on this special day--my father and mother
and Carrie, Goldie, and little Mae,
Claude, Ellzie, and me.

On a snowy Thanksgiving,
we would hitch the team to the sled,
sleigh-bells on the horses,
and drive the eight miles
to Grandpa's.
The horses seemed to feel
the holiday spirit!
They would lift their hooves high
feeling the rhythm of their
clopping feet on the packed snow.

Inside Grandma's house
there were all kinds of vegetables,
and the big turkey in the oven
with gravy enough to feed
all the cousins and aunts. . .
A busy house: children whooping,
women talking, in their glory,
pies in the big oven, smelling good!
The men outdoors, of course,
looking over the stock.
And soon the dinner-bell.

DAD GIBSON by Garnett Gibson

I went to church when I was young
--a little white frame church
next to the park in Fairland, Illinois.
My Dad was the janitor.
In the winter he would scoop snow
from in front of the church.
Then he would build a fire
in the stove to warm the church.
Folks would come to church in sleighs
or on horseback. After Sunday School,
the Minister would preach a long sermon.
Then my Dad would lock up the church
and we all went home.

I sometimes helped with the fires
or the coal-oil lamps and clearing up.
One winter morning, my Dad went over
to the church early. Inside,
the church was very dark, and
he felt his way toward the stove
to light it.

He thought he saw a gleam of white
or shine floating a little above a pew!
He was kind of scared, was mumbling
and grumbling under his breath.
Just couldn't be a ghost!
Well, he'd just settle that matter,
so he reached out with one hand--felt like
dry hay. Or matted hair. He let out a yell
but he stood his ground. Then he

continued

saw two white eyeballs float up. . .

Finally he found and struck a match
with trembling hand. The Preacher!
What could such a man be doing
in a dark cold church before sunup!

"Are y'O.K., Reverend?" he asked.
"Certainly!" was the reply.
"Uh--Mighty early--for Church matters!"
"Not for prayin'!"
"Oh. Well, yes. I'll get a little
heat goin' for you, Reverend."

So he lit the stove and one lamp
and came home, still exploding.

YES by Rosella Wilson (her first)

I like this group
But I don't write poems.
I've always been pretty active
in Women's Club
I was president of it once.
I haven't been here very long
It's nice. I've made nice friends!

RAISIN' CANE IN CLARK COUNTY by Ernest Newman

Near Charleston our farmland was.
We raised plenty
of sugar cane
for makin' sorghum.
White sugar was too high
to buy a lot of.
Sorghum molasses
was a staple food on the farm.
You plant the seed.
When it matures
You cut the tops off,
then grind the main stalks
in a mill.
The sweet juice from this mash
is cooked down to
proper molasses.

SORGHUM by Clara Veach

My Dad ran a small
Sorghum business at one time
Raised a sizeable crop of cane.
He had his own mill and boiling pans.

One of his sisters was an expert
cooking it down. Wooden paddles
and constant stirring.
She knew exactly when it was done.
Never lost a pan.

How good it smelled--bubbling
out there in the summer-kitchen
in the early fall air!
My Dad barrelled and shipped it too.

THE BOX SOCIAL by Garnett Gibson

Johnnie Guinn had just transferred to our school two weeks before the Social. He wanted to do what the other boys did and be one of us. He liked the girls too and was entranced by the whispering and giggling they did in planning what food, and how to decorate their box. Only the name inside could reveal the girl that belonged to the box, and a boy had to buy it to find out!

Johnnie figured he'd take his earnings so he could buy the prettiest box and hope for the prettiest girl--Sarah. The boys clustered round the auctioneer, shoving and teasing each other. The plainer boxes went up for bidding first. Johnnie had his eye on one with yellow paper roses on top. He watched Sarah's face hoping for a sign or a clue. Turning back, he saw the roses lifted high and heard WhatamIbid? WhatamIbid? Startled, Johnnie said in a too-high voice, "Twenty-five cents!" A silence. You weren't supposed to bid your top price first! He heard the Man say "Yes sir, young man." He looked back to see if the boys were laughing at him. "Once," "Twice" and "Sold" echoed in his head. Flushed and flustered, he pulled out his shiny quarter and took the box, thinking of Sarah and him eating her sandwiches. He smiled at her but she was looking past him, and a plump old gal blocked his view. Why was she grinning? "That's my box, so that makes you my beau while we eat the chicken and cake!" "Yesum," he said, hopelessly, "pretty roses!" "Why, thank you, young man!"

O CHRISTMAS! by Ethel Graybeal

Near Christmas
Santa Claus was there all the time.
We had a great big stove, and
oh my, it made the house
so warm and cozy.
Christmas Eve, my husband
would dress up like Santa
and come jingling in!
How the children carried on!
--singing, jumping, laughing.

We made the sitting room so special
with the tree and the tinsel
--that fresh smell of evergreen--
and the children's small decorations.
Each child sat on Santa's knee,
and stroked his silky white beard.
Then I had to play piano for them
to sing quietly, "Silent Night."
It took all the verses for them
to settle down. Then upstairs to bed,
for Morning and Surprises under the tree
would come soon!

I came downstairs to join Santa
in laying out the homemade presents.
The lights off, except for two candles,
the room was magical. Heavenly angels,
elves, stars, bells and the Manger Scene
seemed to be circling around us.

THAT FATEFUL DAY by Garnett Gibson

How it snowed! Never let up
all that fateful day
back in February, 1914
and still snowing next morning.

People everywhere wondering
"When will it stop?"
"How can we take care of our stock?"
We cleared a spot on an upstairs window
and peered out. Snow everywhere--
Drifts five to eight feet high!

We could see a passenger train marooned
on the track, frozen into a drift.
With the strong wind, and dense whirling
snow blowing, covering hedgerows,
it was impossible to start the rescue yet.
The wind still blew from the east
and that meant to the old-timers
"Expect the worst."

But by the second morning, it had stopped.
The snow-crust could bear the weight
of handsleds and men. We set out
for the train as soon as the stock
was cared for. Others were coming
to the train from all directions
to organize the rescue. The folks
on the train had trouble keeping warm
but they shared the food and water
they had, and with the supplies we brought
things were all right in the coaches.
The big digout could begin: In 1914
it was still man-power and man-wits
that had to clear the tracks of
the worst drifts in the train's history!

RALPH AND THE ANIMALS by Theresa Pelichoff

After I was married we lived on a farm.
Our inquisitive small son Ralph
loved to bring in news of the animals.

I
"Mama, come quick," he yelled from the barn.
"The cow swallered her calf
and he's tryin' to climb out!"

II
Exploring the hayloft, he found
a nest of pigeons, came in and reported
"Mama, those birds will catch cold 'cause
the mother forgot to dress 'em this morning."

III
"Mama, that cow's goin' to eat her calf again.
She's lickin' him with her tongue and--"

IV
Gathering eggs with me, he said
"Mama look! That hen has a baby comin' out."
"That's only an egg, Ralph."
"I know. Open it up, we're goin' to have babies!"

V
Not just animals. A lady came to see me.
She was going to have a baby. Ralph knew,
and helped me serve cake and coffee. He said,
"You better eat that 'cause the baby's hungry!"

VI
My husband could fix anything. By looking
at a thing, he could tell what was wrong.
Ralph counted on this. In winter we turned
off lights early to save money. Ralph said
"Why can't Daddy climb up our tallest ladder
and bring down a star to light us with?"

THE POOR OF EUROPE by Theresa Pelichoff

Looking back, I think what saved
the lives of the very poor in Europe
was potatoes.
They could be stored underground
for winter use.
They were highly nutritious
if scrubbed, cooked, and eaten
skins and all.
And the last potatoes of one year's crop
served as seed for the next.

But as their poverty deepened on the farms
the Europeans looked beyond their borders.
When the impoverished families sold
all they had left, for ship-passage,
steerage, to America, The Great Dream
was all they could hold to.
And the courage to make it come true
burned in their eyes. I was five but I knew.
That's why, when the Statue of Liberty
emerged from the fog of New York Harbor,
all of us on shipboard were weeping,
were praying. We already knew by heart
The Liberty's words. You could hear
them mumbled in the different languages.

We walked up the gangplank from rough seas
into our new country. Suddenly, I was
taller than anyone. They had all knelt
down, in that surge of humanity that is
America, and kissed the blessed ground,
in gratitude.
"Give me your Tired, your poor,
your huddled masses," said the Lady
with the torch held high
to light our way.

CHRISTMAS OF 1914 by Ernest Newman

I remember it because we all had
such a good time.
I was 31 then and I had a lot
of company that day--
My brothers and sisters and neighbors.

The dinner was at my house in Mattoon.
We had fried chicken, tomatoes,
potatoes, beans and sauerkraut
and homemade ice icream.
We always made our own ice cream
in a hand-turned freezer,
packed in ice and salt.

There were about fifteen of us
and my Mother cooked the whole meal!
She really knew how to get at it--
only took her about an hour.

There was a lot of snow on the ground.
Some of the company came in cars,
but it was pretty expensive
to own one then.

I like to remember the happenings
of that happy day.

THE HORIZON by Helen E. McCullough

Off where the grass grows into the sky
Off where the air hides birds that fly
Off where our far-flung yearnings lie--
That's the horizon.

MINIATURE by Helen E. McCullough

A little hill, a little child
Who capered all around,
And plucked the yellow sorrel
That grew close to the ground.

A tiny stream that trickled near,
A cloudlet floating high--
So much of beauty in this world
Beneath that bit of sky.

EARTHBOUND by Helen E. McCullough

An eyelash moon in a grey-blue sky
Kept bobbing up over the mountain.
It seemed to call and beckon to me
As it danced there over the mountain.

What did it mean, that line of flame
So persistent over the mountain?
Since I did not know and feared to learn
I stayed at the foot of the mountain.

And now in my dreams I often see
White fire above black mountain,
And it haunts me to know what might have been
Had I climbed to the peak of the mountain.

Ed. note: Helen wrote these poems and others earlier in her life. Since she is now a member of this group, we hope she will soon be able to return to her writing, with or without a scribe.

MY FEET by John Sauget

Last night as I undressed for bed
A curious thought went through my head.
I found myself staring at my feet,
Those extremities at times so slow,
at times so fleet
--With bumpy, boned, and long, long toes
(I sure am glad they're not my nose)--
Those two odd appendages so quiet and discreet.
They go unnoticed much of the time,
Unless they itch, or ache, or appear in rhyme.

Ah, the folly of wearing all these
stylish shoes
Made all of plastic and exotic glues,
And assembled by some process I'll
never understand
And guaranteed untouched by any human hand.

Such inhospitable, cramped, unyielding houses
Produce a heat akin to fire,
And this discomfort soon arouses
My feet to untold heights of ire:
They take so much, and then rebel
And tingle, chafe and start to swell,
Then yield to tears and start to smell
While longing for a softer place to dwell,
Like cozy slippers that fit them well,
Or--ah! such pleasure!--a naked romp
upon the sand
Or the cool dark clods of our prairie land.

But no! Our civilized code has long insisted
That feet be crammed and shoved and twisted
Into boots, loafers, pumps, moccasins, oxfords,
sandals and thongs
Inflicting dreadful horrors and unspeakable
wrongs.

--continued

MY FEET--concluded

I'm filled with grief and hateful odium
When I consider each fragile podium
I took for granted
Each time I gallivanted from here to there
And assumed my angled pair would get me where

I've headed.
How my feet have dreaded
All those pitted paths and bumpy lanes
And suffered in silence, avoiding sprains.
They've never balked or refused to stir,
And carried me yonder, bruised as they were.

So as I sat there, humbled on my bed last night
I wept and mumbled out a psalm
And, using tears as soothing balm,
Massaged each joint with profound catharsis
And soothed each tender metatarsus.

My wife awoke and, eager to console,
Turned on the light
And thought I suffered from the casserole
She burned last night.

But soon she saw my plight,
And, switching out the light
With cold and calloused self-control,
Assumed her usual wifely role,
And sent me out for Dr. Scholl.

Ed. note: John, administrator of the home, wrote this playful poem for the group because some were eager to get into tightly-rhymed writing as soon as possible.

THE GOLDEN YEARS SONG by Roberta Scouffas

As on the farm the seasons turn on spokes
of gold:
The joyous song of larks across plowed sod
Then yellow roses climbing on your open gate
And golden moon, a lantern through the
dark cold nights

Refrain I
Then comes the harvest bountiful
to waiting bins
Then comes the joyous psalm of hearts content
The lighted faces of church-gathered
friends so dear
The peace of those whose exultation
is in God.

As seasons turn, and come to gold
all in good time
So have your lives together patterned true
For fifty years our many worlds
have turned about
Upon the golden core of your abiding faith.

Refrain II
DREAM OF THE SHEPHERDS AS THEY WATCH
THE YOUNG LAMBS GROW
DREAM OF THE PLANTERS FOR THE SEEDS THEY SOW:
NOW COMES THE HARVEST GOLD TO YOU NEW
FRIENDS, SO DEAR
NOW COMES THE HARVEST SONG IN THIS
YOUR GOLDEN YEAR.

There is much common ground between the group's cherished memories of farm and village life and mine, so I want to share this poem with you. It sings to the Irish tune called Londonderry Air or Danny Boy. --Ed.

AFTERTHOUGHT by Roberta Scouffas

Looking back through the 12 weekly sessions of the poetry teaching, I feel strongly the pleasure of working with these very special persons. But the basic problem was that only three persons, out of the ten or twelve who worked steadily through the course, could write out rough drafts of their own work. Eileen Weitzman, my co-worker in the course, and I accepted this physical disability along with hearing loss, eye problems, and crippling arthritis that frustrated many of these bright minds. We could write down their single sentences for the composite poems, but how could the "talking" poems of ten people be transcribed as the course moved along? We tried a tape-recorder but ruled it out. The live and responsive scribe writing down their words sparked their minds. So Eileen recruited five girls from a high school civics class to serve as scribes along with several adult volunteers.

We briefed and blessed our new scribes, and modeled for them. It was Session 3 by then, and after the Talking Poem method was explained, "The Circus" suggested as a subject, and the usual "thinking-time" with soft music on the stereo, we decided to move to the long Bingo table in the dining room to do the talking and scribing. I was writing for Theresa, the born story-teller, with a faultless flow of English, sense of humor, and natural human warmth. I had been writing fast, because even Theresa's digressions are poems in themselves. "Look," she said. I raised my eyes-- and Yes! The dining room was luminous with late sun, like a halo encircling the animated twosomes. "This is real. Separate and apart from the purity or quality of the product," I thought. They were all tossing

AFTERTHOUGHT (continued)

bits and pieces of circus lore into the pot--whose is whose?--And how long has it been since Ernie laughed like that? Everyone worked overtime that day without knowing it.

But when the tousled notes were thrown into my hands on everyone's way out, I knew the problem still existed and was mine to deal with. The talking poem had to pass through two minds--the scribe's, then mine to determine line-lengths and configuration on the printed page as well as "gathering" through the various talks with the Poet, bits that suddenly fit together. The digressions and irrelevancies often had meaning, and later were their own poem. I still ponder the utterly different worlds of the academic and the older communal and folk ways. Then I return to our poets' world with the print-outs of their work, and they are happy.

The halting, guarded words have left off. The words tumble over each other sometimes. "The Old Steam Locomotive" evoked great poems. A wheel-chair lady, Blanche, got hold of a pencil and barely legibly wrote about the train whistle "It was Wonder Fell. Wish I could hear it again!" Charlie wrote a train poem with the rhythm of the wheels on the track in it! And Nellie Gibson wrote her First Poem about running away down the railroad track, with all of us asking for more details, and cheering her on. I have noticed too that if a person in the group is depressed or discouraged, I go back and read to them the poems they have done. It gives them peace of mind.

THE SENIOR POETS PROJECT by Ron Szoke

In August 1977 my friend Eileen Weitzman telephoned to say that she had been reading poet Kenneth Koch's just-published I Never Told Anybody: Teaching Poetry in a Nursing Home: could the Arts and Humanities Council help organize a similar project locally? Having read Koch's account of his project in the New York Review of Books of 20 January 1977, I immediately agreed that the idea sounded like an admirable way to perform a human service while furthering the cultural purposes of the Council.

We then began to plan such a project. A fund-raising appeal describing the project was written and circulated in September. This drew support from several contributors, but the amount received was still far short of the minimum funding required. An item based on this appeal then appeared in the Courier on October 3, thus coming to the attention of the Illinois Humanities Council and its Executive Director, Marvin Vawter. He quickly announced that support would be forthcoming from the discretionary funds at his disposal for aid to small projects. The Senior Poets Project was a reality.

Eileen had meanwhile enlisted the services of Roberta Scouffas of Urbana as leader-instructor for our poetry-writing workshop; together they began to conduct Thursday afternoon sessions at the Urbana Nursing Home on Philo Road. Consultation with the Council's member writers' groups, Illinois Writers and the Red Herring Poets, revealed that they had high praise for Roberta and were unable to suggest anyone better suited, both as a person and as a poet, for her very special and highly demanding assignment: that of "drawing out" and giving form to the life-experiences of a group of people, 60 or older, most of whom had never before written much of anything (least of all poetry), and who began with the conviction

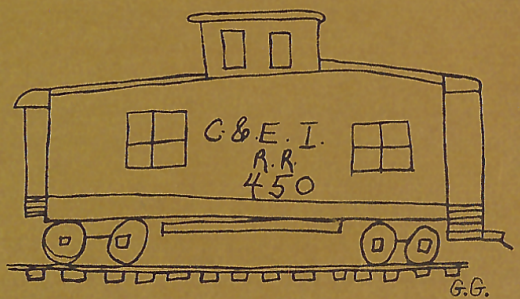
that they had nothing to say, that nobody would be interested in their stories, etc.

Roberta persistently did far more than could reasonably have been asked to make the pilot project succeed: making an extra trip to the nursing home each week, typing, copying and distributing the previous week's output, selecting and editing the poems to be included in this anthology. An excellent illustrated feature story on the early progress of the group by C.A. Buesching was published in the November 20 News-Gazette.

Obstacles and discouragements were plentiful. For some, reticence and inhibitions remained strong throughout; a few never "opened up" to become full participants. Attention spans were sometimes short and reluctant poets wanted to turn to other things. Failing hearing often prevented effective communication. Weak and palsied hands frequently could not physically write: Koch's scheme was adopted of using volunteer "scribes" to write down the material as it was "talked."

Unfortunately, the budget originally drawn up for the project badly underestimated the time and money costs of producing the "evaluation report" you are now reading. There is, at present, no assurance that funding can be found for repeating the project in another nursing home this Spring. But I believe that compelling evidence for the value of continuing and expanding the project is now in your hands.

This booklet embodies many of the most intense and poignant moments of some long and eventful lives--of memories reaching back almost three-quarters of a century, back to experiences and ways of life that mass society has largely obliterated. These moments have been distilled and given shape here so that our poets may have records of their stories to pass on, and so that we, their readers, may know the fascination to be found in having these experiences preserved and unlocked for us.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